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North Korea-South Korea: Olympic Update

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Summary

As the Olympics approach, North Korea has failed in its seven-year-long effort to change the venue of the Games from Seoul, build international support for a boycott, or negotiate a role as cohost. All but seven countries will send teams to the Olympics, and a record number of athletes will compete. P'yongyang nonetheless appears set on attempting to ruin the Games. To deal with its own diplomatic failure, it is portraying South Korea as too dangerous a site for the competition and encouraging South Korean dissidents to demonstrate to make that point. P'yongyang is also staging competing international events to distract domestic attention and force its allies to show their support. None of its tactics are working well. Assuming the Games go smoothly, South Korea is certain to use them to expand contacts with the North's Communist allies. As a result, North Korea could face even greater political and economic challenges from the South in the post-Olympic period.

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Entering the Home Stretch

Final preparations are under way for the 17 September opening of the Seoul Olympics, with 161 countries sending teams. Only Cuba, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Seychelles, Albania, and North Korea are refusing to attend. The North has repeatedly called for support from its major allies, but the Soviet Union, China, and the East Europeans have stood firm since accepting their invitations in January. Soviet behavior points clearly at Moscow's desire to participate. The visits by Soviet officials to South Korea to discuss security and logistics contrast sharply with the lack of communication between Moscow and the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee in the runup to the 1984 Olympics. [redacted]

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Despite a series of sports talks under the International Olympic Committee's auspices over the past three years, there appears virtually no chance of a North-South agreement to share Olympic events. IOC President Samaranch occasionally has repeated his offer to allow the North to host some archery, table tennis, women's volleyball, and other contests, but in late May he told reporters it was "too late" to arrange team events in the North. Samaranch has said he is willing to travel to P'yongyang for a last negotiating effort on sharing some individual competitions but only if he is specifically invited. [redacted]

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To date the North has declined to forward the invitation. P'yongyang has consistently rejected any participation formula short of cohosting and derides events proposed for the North as a mere subset of the "Seoul" Olympics. South Korea also is standing pat. President Roh Tae Woo, Park Sae Jik--president of the Seoul Olympic Organizing Committee--and other spokesmen reject cohosting, although insist they are willing to accept North Korean participation. [redacted]

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P'yongyang in a Corner but Still Fighting

With the start of the Games looming, North Korea is trying to maximize the South's headaches and minimize its own loss of face. P'yongyang has stepped up propaganda that portrays the South as a dangerous venue--rampant with AIDS and crime--for the Olympics, hoping to persuade participants to back out. Since spring, the North has tried to make the Olympics an issue that would fuel student protests in the South. In stressing P'yongyang's interest in cohosting, the North Korean press has portrayed the South's refusal to agree as an attempt to perpetuate the division of the peninsula. We do not believe South Korean radicals are guided by the North, but they have adopted P'yongyang's position, arguing that the Olympics should symbolize Korean reunification. South Korean students who attempted to organize a meeting at P'anmunjom on 10 June with their counterparts from the North stressed cohosting. On 28 May, leaders of 67 South Korean dissident organizations signed a statement in favor of the North's stance. [redacted]

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Several upcoming events suggest P'yongyang hopes to distract its domestic audience from the Olympics as well as force its allies to show public support:

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- North Korea is trying to attract a stellar international gathering for its 40th anniversary on 9 September, eight days before the Olympic opening ceremony, including Chinese Communist Party Chief Zhao Ziyang. [redacted] North Korea also is asking African nations to send high-level delegations. 25X1 25X1
- The North hopes to stage a "counter Olympics" when it hosts the 1989 World Youth Festival, an event held under the auspices of the World Federation of Democratic Youth, a Soviet front organization. North Korean media have given great publicity to preparations for this event and to efforts to attract broad international participation. [redacted] 25X1 25X1

P'yongyang's returns so far have been thin. A recent article in the Soviet press expressed skepticism about the North's preparations for the Festival, for example, and reported other countries' reluctance to send delegates "to the other end of the earth." Even so, the North has had some success in creating a sense of uneasiness in some quarters about the Olympics--many athletes and governments continue to express concern that North Korea might attempt to disrupt the Games with terrorism. Athletes in the United States and elsewhere also have expressed fear for their safety, and the Australian Government has announced contingency planning for evacuation of participants and spectators in case of trouble. [redacted] 25X1

Although there is no evidence that any country or national Olympic committee is contemplating reversing its decision to participate, concern about Olympic security has spawned close consultations on security, particularly among South Korea, the United States, and Japan. Even the Soviets and Chinese are promoting the security of the Games; both reportedly approached P'yongyang about its intentions after the sabotage by North Korean agents of the Korean airliner last year. [redacted] 25X1

Outlook

North Korea retains the option of openly attacking the Olympic Games in a last-ditch attempt to spoil the South's triumph, but the costs of this--or even the sponsorship of less dramatic terrorist acts--would be high for P'yongyang. Assuming neither tactic is chosen, a successful Olympics will enable Seoul to serve many goals, including its push to expand ties to Communist states. The Olympics have already accelerated that development with the opening of a Hungarian trade office in Seoul. Poland and Yugoslavia--or at least its Slovene republic--have indicated publicly they will follow suit. We believe China, the Soviet Union, and East Germany may well exchange trade offices with South Korea after the Olympics. [redacted] 25X1

North Korea, meanwhile, is certain to face difficult choices. A stance in favor of dialogue obviously would represent tacit acceptance of an accommodation with a South Korea that has made important gains in prestige as well as in relations with P'yongyang's major allies. More belligerent behavior, including efforts to encourage domestic turbulence, could discomfit Seoul. It could also leave the North isolated,

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however, as its allies move forward with their South Korean contacts. Whatever the North decides, a successful Olympics will underscore P'yongyang's increasing isolation and undercut its bedrock resistance to international recognition of two Korean states. [redacted]

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NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA: OLYMPIC UPDATE

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